



38 Eastwood Drive, Suite 100
South Burlington, VT 05403

P: (802) 865-0255
F: (802) 865-0266
HungerFreeVT.org

FY 2024 Funding Priorities to Address the Ongoing Crisis of Hunger and Food Insecurity

Prepared for the House Committee on Appropriations
Anore Horton, Executive Director
ahorton@hungerfreevt.org / 802-231-1293
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Hunger Free Vermont respectfully submits this request for funding support for two specific measures we believe are critically needed to address the current hunger crisis in our state, which is about to become much worse for those of us living on the lowest incomes. Two in five (40%) of people in Vermont have reported experiencing hunger and food insecurity during 2022, the highest rates ever recorded, according to studies carried out by UVM researchers. The decision by Congress to end the pandemic Emergency Allotments for SNAP (3SquaresVT) this month means that beginning in April, Vermont will lose \$6.5 million a month in food benefits. **Every one of the more than 41,000 households / 72,000 individuals will experience a significant drop in their 3SquaresVT benefits after the final Emergency Allotment payment in March.** The average loss per 3SquaresVT household will be \$100-\$500 per month, with some households losing much more.

Help Vermont's Charitable Food Network Mitigate the End of SNAP Emergency Allotments Please fully fund the Vermont Foodbank's request for \$3 million.

Vermont's network of 225+ food shelves and community meal sites and 25+ direct distribution sites are reporting increased need that is stretching their capacities to the limit. People are deeply worried about how they will continue to provide enough food for themselves and their families as food costs remain so high and the Emergency Allotments end. Food shelves are reporting that they are seeing a significant increase in working families with children using these charitable food resources, and overall increases in usage between 20% and 84%. The funding that the Foodbank is requesting is especially important because it is the lowest barrier to access to food for individuals and families who need it, and it specifically supports people in getting the fresh foods and staples they need every day. For those losing a portion of their 3SquaresVT benefits, and for the many who aren't eligible for 3SquaresVT but whose income is still far below JFO's basic needs thresholds, the charitable food network is essential and currently pushed to the brink.

Increase Funding for Meal Programs Serving Older Vermonters and People with Disabilities Please increase funding for "Meals on Wheels"

About 15% of older Vermonters are food insecure, and low-income households living on fixed incomes are in many cases facing some of the steepest cuts to their 3SquaresVT benefits with the end of Emergency Allotments. In some cases, these households will see their food support drop from over \$280 per month to just \$23 per month starting in April. Meals on Wheels providers, along with senior centers and other organizations that operate congregate meal sites are already struggling to meet the requests for the healthy meals they provide. This program supports two very specific and vulnerable populations in a very specific way, and coupled with support for the charitable food network supported by the Foodbank, it can help to make sure that as many Vermonters as possible are getting the support they need for food security.

Thank you for considering these funding priorities. Hunger Free Vermont understands that ending hunger in permanent and dignified ways requires funding multiple systems of support, like the Vermont Foodbank and Meals on Wheels because ending hunger requires providing meals when and where people need them.

We appreciate so much all of the conversations you have been having about addressing basic needs of Vermonters, including housing, child care, paid leave, and all the human services supports. We know your task is monumental, and that you understand and are considering all of the needs. We hope you will be able to address these two critical needs before your work is finished this week.